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Courage in the Classroom

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Introductory

Most of the classrooms where I work feel much more perilous than the room we are in right now—to me and to my students. It takes only a little courage to greet strangers and enter into conversation at our conference. It takes a bit more to jointly produce and nurture climates that support educational experiences in the kinds of classrooms I know.

I will talk about two things today. First, I'll give a brief discussion of the nature of virtue generally (drawing from work by Thomas Aquinas). Second, I'll talk about classic accounts of cultivating virtue, which don't seem to have a straightforward point of application in classrooms. Very fine teachers and educational theorists have developed powerful techniques to foster moral education by building strategies for helping students learn to reason and respond appropriately to moral challenges into the content of curricular units. I will be talking about building community in classrooms, and about how even an effort to make a classroom seem less risky provides indirect support for cultivating courage. I will discuss two sorts of classroom situations—lecture class and discussion class, giving slightly different accounts of courage-supporting teaching in each.

Virtue

Thomas Aquinas was deeply influenced by Aristotle's work, but, unlike the ancient pagan philosopher, Aquinas's neo-Aristotelian account of virtue begins from a deep appreciation of the degree to which it is hard for human beings to do the things that they need to do to live well. Consider the ways that perfectly ordinary people, and people of excellent character, and people sunk in darkness fall short of the kind of good that human beings can do, enable, support, and encourage in life. We fail, and most people, in some sense at least, know better when they do something they should not do. For Aquinas, cultivation of virtue helps to remedy this kind of disorder in our lives, and even though very few of us will develop harmonious reasonable practical orientations directed at good (*with or without* discipline and training) Aquinas, like Aristotle, takes it that we are drawn that way. Fundamentally, we seek to pursue good and avoid bad, which is why we have it in us to work to improve ourselves in the first place.

The precept that good is to be done and pursued (and bad avoided) is not a principle that we can adopt or reject willy-nilly. It is a condition on the intelligibility of animal movement generally, and human action specifically. If you cannot see any sense in which what someone is up to might be directed at pursuing or doing good, or at avoiding bad, you have no way of making sense of the doing in question. This is as true for the cats that live in my home as it is for the humans, but, unlike the humans, when the cat goes for something or flees something the cat is normally right about what is desirable or undesirable for felines. Not so for the humans at my place. Getting a grip on what cats or humans might be up to requires seeing how doing this or that might have seemed like a good sort of thing to do under the circumstances. That humans are not always drawn to what is good for us (or averse to things that are bad for us) is an ongoing aspect of Aquinas's understanding of the role of virtue in our lives. No matter how good we are, we are never entirely immune to the charms of things that are not entirely good for us, nor entirely enthralled at the prospect of doing, thinking or saying what we ought to do, think and say. In this respect, Aquinas is at home with ongoing human imperfection in a way that, on some readings, at least, Aristotle was not.

For Aquinas, human nature as we know it is fallen nature— we are, he thinks, operating at a loss. The strength we enjoyed (by God's grace) in a pre-lapsarian condition was a matter of orientation and governance: the human's higher powers were subject to God, the lower powers to the higher powers, and the body to the soul. In the pre-lapsarian condition, perfect rectitude of the will was

possible. In the pre-lapsarian condition humans could act on their innate love of good without impeding themselves. In short, our powers were in proper order, given the kind of creatures we are.

The corrective supplied by virtues like temperance, courage, justice, and prudence is meant to begin to reintegrate our powers—or at least to foster cooperation among them—in a way that helps to rectify the will. In effect, for our kind of intellect—the sort that an animal can embody—and for our kind of animal—the sort endowed with intellect *as such* oriented to the highest good possible for us—we need work to establish the order in inclination and governance that helps us to direct ourselves to the goods it belongs to us to pursue.

What an acquired virtue is, on this view, is a cultivated character trait—a strength—that helps to foster cooperation among our intellects, will, emotions, perceptions, and desires so that we can more easily pursue human good and avoid what is bad for us.

Following Aristotle broadly, Aquinas takes it that a virtue brings the full and appropriate actualization of a human power—one that allows for both the upward inclination of passions and appetite toward reason and the downward governance of passion and appetite by reason actualized in overall pursuit of the good.

Aquinas thinks that he takes from Aristotle an understanding that practical wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage must be cultivated if one is to lead a good human life. The classic claim that you can't have one virtue unless you have all of them, on this view, is rooted in an understanding of what a virtue is—just as an exercise regime is supposed to help you to build a strong and healthy body, cultivation of your character is supposed to help you to develop harmonious orientation toward good in yourself, in your life, and in your relations with others as a whole. That sort of harmony is more than the sum of its parts. Cultivation of virtue concerns all aspects of your life at once, and strengthens you as a being in pursuit of the good that is yours to pursue.

The Classic Account of Acquired Virtue

The classic story about how we acquire virtue goes like this—we build the relevant strength of character through performing virtuous acts. We build justice by doing right by one another. We build courage both by developing an understanding of the risks it is worth taking—the good at stake in our circumstances and how best to handle fear or anxiety in the face of things that threaten those goods. We build temperance by refraining from indulging ourselves in various ways. Practical wisdom develops through concerted efforts to be right with one another and long practice with self-correction. We borrow from the virtue of our elders when we are young—we imitate them until we can begin to trust our own judgment. And then the task of continuing moral education becomes ours.

Now, there are two very different kinds of courage in classic and medieval stories about what we need in order to correct our patterns of avoidance and what most will help us us to fear the right sorts of things in the right sorts of ways. Aristotle focused on battlefield courage, the sort necessary in helping aristocratic men (he wrote about aristocratic men) fight enemies in defense of the community. Aristotelian courage is a matter of being wisely aggressive. You fight for what's worth fighting for and risk your life to defend what is yours to defend in the way that it falls to you to defend it. You were to acquire this virtue by learning from your fathers' good examples, while preparing yourself for the likely later challenges of battle by participating regimes of physical discipline, competition, and training that could be very harsh. The other sort of courage—call it "moral courage"—*may* show itself in battle, but off the battlefield, courageous people have more

often been called upon to show courage in enduring hardship and standing up for their understanding of what is right.

I do not know of any account of courage that says that we should cultivate it by starting wars gratuitously or by repeatedly seeking out occasions when we might be made to suffer for our convictions. In the tradition that Aquinas knew, it was a strike against someone if she went running off in search of an opportunity to be persecuted—it showed a lack of respect for the life God had given her to lead. Instead, just as young male Greek citizens were well-advised to build up the strength of their bodies and engage in warlike competitions, we might cultivate moral courage by building a practical orientation alert to the goods at stake in various aspects of our lives, and developing an understanding of which *are*, and which are not, worth taking risks to protect. Developing a practical orientation alive to these things is not just a matter of learning how to think and feel about the good at issue in our lives. It involves patterns of action responsive to developed, cultivated modes of thinking and feeling about the good in our lives.

I assume that most of the classrooms of interest to us are not sites for training soldiers even if our students hope to go on to military careers. It would be worse than bad practice to try to build hostile classroom spaces in which young people will have ample opportunity to experience hardship and threat. Still, the classroom itself is a space for cultivating good character and students in late adolescence and young adulthood can help in producing classroom environments that nurture character.

I work in higher education. The techniques I'll describe work well in this setting, but also work with late adolescents and with adults in continuing or returning educational settings.

Notice the various ways in which classrooms are threatening places. Here are some of them:

- We are in a room with strangers who might not like us at all.
- Students are under pressure to be pleasing to instructors, and may not know how to win over instructors.
- Instructors worry about how the students respond to instructors, to other students, and to the material under discussion.
- The rooms in which we meet each other are rarely pleasant places.
- Classroom dynamics are sometimes partially determined by the disposition of furniture in rooms, and there are many ways in which furniture can work against producing a learning community in a classroom.

How do we begin to build the kind of awareness that fosters courage under these circumstances?

Courage in the Lecture Class

In lecture classes, we can start with a greeting and use the first minute of class to mark the ways in which we are in a room together for the sake of learning. A simple shared greeting before there is any other content at issue does a lot of good in this regard. And a lecturer has a lot of power in setting the tone for a lecture class.

For example, my students do not always know that I can see all of them as I lecture. I often comment on things like whether we are looking bored or confused and ask for help understanding our mood when I can't read us. I pause to check in and make space for questions fairly frequently. And I have back and forth discussion—often a back and forth in which I perform being tremendously stupid about something important in order to give them a chance to tell me how

you ought to do something, and all of us a chance to discuss why one ought to do things that way rather than the way I've suggested.

Because I teach moral philosophy, and because most of my students do not think that they have proper moral knowledge at all—they may have opinions, but they use a language of courtesy to say why these ought not be a bother to anyone else—I need to start by eliciting moral knowledge so that there is something for moral philosophy to be the philosophy *of*. The example that worked very well two years ago in an introductory course had to do with breaking off a long-term relationship. I tell them that I have been in one (noting that "long term" when you are my age is measured in decades, whereas it might be a matter of days or weeks or months in their world). I tell them that the relationship has stopped working for me, that I mean to break it off. And then I tell them that I plan to text the soon-to-be-formerly Beloved in order to break it off. They explain that you can't do this with a text. It's rude.

So I offer a voice mail alternative, urging that the sound of my voice, at least, carries the news in a less cold way. Again they tell me that this won't do.

So I offer the following alternative—I invite my person for a meal at a restaurant we've liked in the past and, once there, stage a big fight. My students calmly tell me that I am on the right track. The restaurant brawl is preferable to the text or voice mail. I pretend confusion. Normally, doing something in a public place is supposed to be much ruder than doing that thing in the privacy of a text or a voice mail. The students patiently explain that at least my partner has a chance to answer back in the restaurant.

Why is this important? After all, texting and voice mail are as available to my partner as they are to me. And everyone knows what it's like to exchange texts and play voice mail phone tag. Why couldn't I count on this sort of standard exchange to do the trick?

The restaurant is better, they tell me, because we need to be face-to-face.

Why does this matter?

It matters, they explain, because of the kind of good that romantic relationships are in human life.

Notice that, in this situation, my students are teaching me the importance of facing my person because of the good at issue in our historic intimacy. I should risk the person's anger or tears because of the good at stake. That is the kind of response that points to the importance of courage. And when I performed this moral idiocy in Introduction to Ethics lecture two years ago, we were able to build on the discussion for the sake of dispensing with the peculiar form of moral relativism that takes root on my campus. I will be happy to discuss this aspect of the lesson if you like.

In building from the performed moral incompetence, I talked us round to noticing that making sense of what people do requires seeing them as aiming at something that is, in some sense, good. In avoiding the challenge of facing my former intimate, I was protecting myself from having to experience my partner's response in person. This was perfectly understandable, but the good we had known was such that I needed to buck up. There was a larger good at stake in the situation.

The other sort of moral knowledge they bring has to do with an understanding of moral prohibitions—kinds of act that are, as such, never good to do and always wrong. There are very few of these, but even if different groups have different catalogues of prohibited act-types, if a group has anything remotely resembling a moral code, some sorts of acts will be beyond the pale. "Genocide," for example, is the name of a collective act-type invented to mark an act that was always wrong and never right, no matter what the circumstances. A kind of moral confusion that is very widespread in my part of the world seems to rest on an implicit understanding that, whereas

there are some kinds of acts that are always wrong and never right just in virtue of the kind of act in question—genocide, for example, or rape—there may not be any positive moral requirements geared to kinds of act. Most solid bits of positive guidance in ethics point to good that can be pursued in more than one way. Normally, indefinitely many different kinds of act might be good to do here and now, under the circumstances. It is almost always the case that unusual circumstances can produce a situation in which what is normally good to do becomes bad. Aristotle's example was returning borrowed property—normally good to do, but not if the borrowed item is a knife and its owner is enraged and likely to murder someone if the knife is returned. My students quickly come to notice and understand that humans pursue things that are, in some sense, good and avoid bad. They also understand that some kinds of acts are always bad, and that most kinds of acts may be good or bad, depending upon further ends and particular circumstances. (Again, I am happy to expand on this asymmetry in discussion.) From this basic moral knowledge, it is possible to engage moral philosophy. We can get this far even in a lecture class.

Courage in Discussion Class

In discussion classes (and in every discussion section for one of my lecture classes) we use two techniques to make the classroom a space for shared exploration and thinking: the pause, and the floating chair.

The pause involves waiting for 10-30 seconds after asking a question before taking any answers. This helps everyone get in the habit of thinking before speaking. I like to think that philosophy is not the only subject in which it is a good idea to get in the habit of thinking before speaking. In the United States, the pause helps to correct for a kind of gender trouble in the higher education classroom. Young women and girls normally think before speaking. Young men and boys sometimes try to work out what they want to add to the discussion *by* speaking. The pause levels that playing field a bit, so that female members of our class are encouraged in the ways in which they normally hold back, and male members are encouraged to formulate their contributions before entering into the fray.

The floating chair is the single most effective tool for promoting classroom discussion that I ever have encountered. In higher education and upper-year secondary education, in my part of the world, students rarely know each others' names on the first day of class, so we start discussion class with an art project in which students make name tags for themselves—printing their names in ways that will be legible across the table or from another corner of the room (depending upon the way in which furniture is setting the terms for our classroom interaction). The rule is that the last person to speak calls on the next speaker. It is an extremely simple rule, but one which entirely defeats the tendency for a discussion class to become a game of verbal ping pong with the instructor. It takes my students some time to get used to it. I have to point out to the last speaker that she has hands up and needs to call on the next speaker until they get the hang of it. But normal courtesy works its magic in a floating chair discussion such that students begin to respond to what just was said automatically, rather than simply seizing their moment in the spotlight to share their brilliance with the rest of us. We greet each other. I ask a question to start us off and then pause, and then we are having a floating chair discussion. It works wonders, in my experience. Among other things, if there are students in the room who are inclined to dominate discussion, their fellow students do the policing so that the instructor is not in the awkward position of having to try to stomp on an over-eager student for the sake of others in the room.

In General

All of these things give students practice in moral courage in the following sense: the good at stake for us in the classroom is education.

Any genuine educational experience is by its very nature scary, and all of the ways in which classroom environments are anxiety-provoking produce fear that hinders the good at stake in our classroom. We fear the wrong things in the wrong ways. The thing that *ought to* scare us is wasting an opportunity to learn with and from each other. That is, in my experience, *way down* on the list of things that students find alarming, even at the University of Chicago where undergraduates pride themselves on being in intellectually challenging circumstances. We can help our students fear the right things in the right ways by communicating with them about the importance of risking genuine educational experiences with each other in the classroom.

A genuine educational experience virtually always involves needing to question something that you have taken for granted—often without even realizing that you were taking it for granted. By playing the fool in the classroom, I work to provide an opportunity for my students to articulate the moral knowledge they already bring into the classroom, but have not really noticed. By using the pause and the floating chair, I help the students' perfectly ordinary sociability become a source of strength to use in building the community necessary to support shared educational experience.

The pedagogic strategies I've discussed are in the service of getting students into the habit of collaborative learning—a kind of community-building focused on the good of education. It indirectly supports cultivating courage by working to redirect misplaced fear to a better target—fear based in concern over one's appearance into fear over wasting an educational opportunity and failing to appreciate the ways in which one's fellow students are vital to producing a classroom world that supports shared educational experience and provides the support necessary for a collective venture that is both good and frightening. It is mostly about making the classroom a place where you do not need extraordinary courage to participate in a learning community, but can develop the kind of courage needed for thought and imagination about your topic, your fellow students, and the aspects of the larger world at issue in your course. In short, you work together to cultivate reasonable fear and the kind of courage important for opening yourself up to the unknowns that come with educational experience.